

Women in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai

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ABSTRACT:

*This paper reveals that the portrayal of women characters in Indian fiction in English and a long and eventual history. Indian factors in English in its nascent stage had only male writers who mainly focused on a man's world where the presence of women was only accidental. Kamala Markandaya belongs to that pioneering group of Indian Women writers who made their mark not just through their subject matter, but also through their fluid, polished, literary style. She has a varied repertoire of woman characters in her fiction. Her first novel **Nectar in a Sieve** (1954) deals with the life, trails and travails of Rukmani. In the face of famine, hunger, death, infidelity and prostitution, amidst dire poverty, Rukmani wages a lone battle against all odds. She wins our sympathy by dint of her will power and determination, and hope in her life is like nectar in a sieve. Rukmani exemplifies the poor rural woman who works long hours, longer than man, in low paid or non-paying jobs with backward technologies.*

*Anita Desai's Novel **Cry the Peacock** led to a shift in Women's space. Confinement in futile domesticity is a major concern in Desai's fiction. Maya, in **Cry the Peacock** took up the pain of displacement and alienation as had never been dealt with before this. In this Maya's obsession with her father and her pampered life before marriage drives her to a point where finding him an alien to her world she kills her husband Gautama and still does not lose the sympathy of the reader. Afterwards she commits suicide. It shows the novelist's serious concern for the societal do's and don'ts. Women in Desai are not satisfied with their feminine space, but they do not have the courage to do much about it.*

KEYWORDS: Nascent stage, pioneering, repertoire, futile domesticity, feminine space

Date of Submission: 03-06-2021

Date of Acceptance: 17-06-2021

I. INTRODUCTION:

The post-Independence era marks the grand inception of the literary emancipation of women. It evinces the creative release of the feminine sensibility, which notwithstanding its relatively later manifestation, merits recognition by virtue of its self-sufficiency. There germinates on opulent and convincing crop of women novelists in the terra firma of Indian fiction in English in the post-Independence era. Several highly talented and prolific women novelists including Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, R.P. Jhabvala, Navantara Sahgal, Attia Hosain, Santha Ram Rau and Shashi Deshpande have enriched Indian fiction in English. Their chief contribution consists of their exploring the moral and psychic dilemmas and repercussions of their women characters along with their efforts to cope with the challenges and achieve a new harmony of relationship with themselves and their surroundings. All these novelists and especially Kamala Markandaya depicts the prelude of a fresh awakening in case of Indian women. Kamala Markandaya stands at the head of these women novelists both chronologically and qualitatively.

Though her earlier novels project the traditional image of woman, her later novels, with the changes in time and circumstances, protrude a new face with the renewal of her traditional image. Due to conflicting forces of tradition and modernity, she comprehends the crisis of value adaptation and her attachment with the family. She is at the crossroad. She does not wish to say good-bye to the traditional image. That is why; she searches a via media that leads her towards compromiser. Reaping the crop of traditional image, she sows the seeds of a new woman as a prelude for a fresh awakening in her novels.

Analysis:

Kamala Markandaya has been accused of blunting her Indian sensibility by being too long in the West. But it could also be argued that her Western exposure has sharpened her sensibilities and tragic vision, whatever the case, the fact remains that her female protagonists have great fortitude. Her sympathies lay with the oppressed the less fortunate and the weak.

Anita Desai's Novel **Cry the Peacock** led to a shift in Women's space. Confinement in futile domesticity is a major concern in Desai's fiction. Maya, in **Cry the Peacock** took up the pain of displacement and alienation as had never been dealt with before this. In this Maya's obsession with her father and her pampered life before marriage drives her to a point where finding him an alien to her world she kills her

husband Gautama and still does not lose the sympathy of the reader. Afterwards she commits suicide. It shows the novelist's serious concern for the societal do's and don'ts. Women in Desai are not satisfied with their feminine space, but they do not have the courage to do much about it. R. S. Pathak, comments on Desai's Women:

Anita Desai has conveyed her women character fundamental dependence on men through her lexicon and tropes mastery command and domination her women sometimes do attempt to assert their independence and self sufficiency, but quest for identity is thwarted at significant junctures no woman in Anita Desai's novels.... has been fortunate enough to free herself from the shackles of femininity.¹

Nayantra Sahgal is one of the finest and most distinguished Indo-Anglian novelists of present time. Fiction writing has reached the pinnacle of its glory with the writing of the established women writer of fiction like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, and Attia Hussain. Nayantara Sahgal occupies a distinguished place among the Indian writers, whose most famous novel *Rich like us* put her in the front rank of contemporary novelists.

Sahgal's fiction is thematically wide ranging unlike Anita Desai. The recurring theme of her fiction is alienation; she treated of almost new themes in each novel with minor repetition. Sahgal is a modern writer of fiction whose work is based on feministic perspective and political views. Intermingling of both these crucial topic is beautifully presented by Sahgal in almost all her novels. Females represented by Sahgal seem weak in the beginning but gradually they pick up the confidence and show their boldness by taking correct decisions for their life.

It is quite visible that women of Sahgal, Rashmi, Saroj, Smirit, Devi, Sylla, Rose, Sonali and Rani of **Vijaygarh**, choose personal happiness over suffering, affirm certain modern notions about self-fulfillment. They value the individual over collective; they value personal fulfillment over social obligation. In opposing their assigned roles, the women are choosing modernity over tradition. In brief, the women of Sahgal represent love, charity, compassion, kindness, altruism and a preference for the emotional over the material. It can be said –

Though Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai does not subscribe to militant feminism, which believes in the overthrow, not of suppressive forces, but of the society itself. Sahgal's women refuse to fit into mould of the 'perfect lady'; but their revolt is more cathartic than defeatist her women strive to carve a respectable and equal place for them within the social order.²

Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya portray the world of Indian married women as they perceive it. Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, these writers do not profess any special affinity for feminist theories nor do they reveal a strong, anti-male stance anywhere. It is true that these novelists are rather concerned with the disturbing question of the existence of women, but they were not misogynists seeking a world without men. These novelists deal with women belonging to both rural and urban, poor and upper classes of the Society. The protagonists depicted in their novels, showed resemblance to each other in some respects. At the same time, their individual characteristics have set them apart from other and contribute to the variety of protagonists that one comes across in these novels.

The novels that are taken up for study are : **Nectar in a Sieve, Some Inner Fury, A Handful of Rice** and **The Silence of Desire** by Kamala Markandaya and **Cry the Peacock, Clear Light of Day, Where Shall We Go This Summer?** and **Fire On The Mountain** by Anita Desai. The study of the selected novels of Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya reveal remarkable similarities and differences in their attitudes and vision. They derive their stuff primarily from their inward and outward (subjective and objective) experiences of life. Their themes have a profound socio-cultural and psychological significance. They have succeeded in capturing the transitional phases of the rapidly changing roles of contemporary women in India. The divergences between the two writers emerge only when the individual works are set against the specific psychological and socio-cultural surroundings.

Both the writers have captured the socio-cultural changes that have radically affected the lives of women since the fifties. The comparative study of these writers on the Concept of Indian women, as an individual and as a wife sibling and parents as well has shed light on several aspects of Indian Tradition and Culture. A comparative study of their fiction reveal, the fundamental unity of human perception especially that of women's perception. Both the writers depict the real images of women in the Indian Society. The selected three novels of each writer have been explored to analyze the main aspects regarding the life viz. marriage, migration, motherhood and midlife of Indian women as wife. In their fiction women characters are brought to the centre stage and their characters are elaborately explored in bringing out their power. However, there is a notable difference between the two writers with respects to the attitude of their central characters towards life.

Desai's women seem to put individuality above every thing else. Most of them are basically tragic characters and introverts. They fail to cope with their surroundings, their families and society. They are psychologically disturbed, morbid, self-absorbed and incoherent in their manners and expression. The desire to live and love clash so violently in them, that their interpersonal relationships become dissonant and jarring and

drive them to withdrawal and alienation. Of course, Desai justifies her selection of solitary and introspective characters. She says:

Well, I think, solitary and introspective people are always very aware of living on the brink. Anyone of us might one day face an experience which may push one over, but perhaps my introspective characters are more aware than other are of what lies on the other side.³

Desai is primarily concerned with the psychological problems of apprehensive women. Neuroticism is a psychological problem. Anita Desai is highly interested in the presentation of the psychological problems of neurotic women of all the ages. The description of psychological problems becomes the base of her writings. Like Kamala Markandaya she is well aware of social problems that affect the people in their personal life. She believes that these social problems decide human mind and finally human beings become the victims of their problems.

Desai's women remain within their orbits and protested against lack of diversity, injustice and humiliations. This does not mean that Desai's women do not desire for harmonious and peaceful life. They have a desire for a deeper union of minds in marital relationship but they are introverts who refuse to compromise and, they have the inability to accept the perspective of their respective partners which inevitably results in isolation and loneliness. Though Desai's women are not fully cut off from familial and social ties their relationships with others are characterized by dissonance and despair.

On the other hand, Markandaya's women have a deep understanding of life, love and concern towards family members, self-sacrificing nature and also possess practical wisdom of life. They get adjusted with the circumstances and sense that they have been happy and will remain happy in future. This infuses in them a sense of fulfillment and tranquility.

It is clear that Markandaya is a incisive defender of affirmative humanistic values. Her vision is downright realistic and practicable rather than utopian. She places the chief characters amidst various challenges of life in order to assert unconquerable spirit of humanity. The women characters emerge so real that one gets a feeling that one has lived with them and known them most intimately.

Passive acceptance, tranquil resignation is again and again advocated so that one may bend and not break. This typical Indian response to the human predicament is bought out in almost all women characters. Though this spirit of passive acceptance may seem to be a sign of weakness to Western eyes – but in reality it is a sign of their strength. She gives extreme importance to Indian values of life. Talking about her national pride, Meenakshi Mukherjee comments:

Her national pride is seen in the fact that in each one of her novels, it is the East which finally wins.⁴

Markandaya is of the opinion that Indian women should confidently pursue her own path holding fast to her traditional values and using methods appropriate to her culture. She should also try to assimilate the best in Western culture. Hence, she presents typical India women characters who are adherent strictly to Indian value system. Her practical women characters appear seemingly happier than Desai's women.

The reason for contentment in Kamala Markandaya's women or gloominess in Anita Desai's women is because of their attitude towards life. It is the vision of life which makes the life happy or sad. Man attains ultimate peace when he or she achieves what he or she desires in live. The achievement of peace depends upon man's vision of life. Most of the human attitudes are shaped during formative years of life. While men are born with tendencies towards temperaments, there are some factors that largely determine the formation of attitude. Shiv Khera, a personality development Trainer, analyses the factors that determine the formation of attitude in human beings as follows:-

Attitudes in human beings are determined by three factors. These are the triple E's of attitude which include: Environment, experience and education.⁵

Environment consists of home atmosphere, cultural, social, religious environments, traditions and beliefs etc. All these environments create a culture. Every place – be it a home or a country – has a culture. In a positive environment, the attitude of the individual is always positive. In the same way, it is tough to expect positive behaviour in a negative environment.

Similarly, human behaviour changes according to their experiences with various people. If he or she has a positive experience with persons, the attitude towards them is likely to be positive and on the contrary negative experiences then to make them cautious. Experiences and events become reference points in one's lives; he or she draws conclusions which serve as guidelines for their future.

A person with a positive attitude is like a fruit of all seasons. He or she is always welcome. A positive attitude makes for a pleasing personality which inspires others and increase enjoyment of life. It also fosters better relationships and reduces pressure in life by making the atmosphere congenial.

For a person with pessimistic attitude life becomes restricted. It creates an unpleasant environment at home. These people find difficulty in keeping friendships, marriages and relationships. Negative attitude leads to resentment and resentment which increases stress in life. These people pass on their negative behaviour to others around them and also to the future generations.

Though human nature is aware of its negative attitude, it resists amendments is uncomfortable. Regardless of its positive and negative effect, change is often stressful. Sometimes one gets so comfortable with their negativity that even when the change is for the better, they don't want to accept it. Thus, the life becomes more and more restricted.

Education refers to both formal and informal types. Indians drown themselves in information but starve for knowledge and wisdom. Strategically applied knowledge translates into intelligence which in turn translates into success. Education whether formal or informal, should not only teach human beings how to make a living but also how to live. Hence, these factors shape the positive and positive aspects of human beings.⁶

Consequently, when the selected novels of Desai's and Markandaya's are analyzed in the light of these aspects, they give a clear picture of how the attitudes are formed during the formative years of childhood and adolescence- combine the experiences and education that one receives in certain environment.

Character Pattern:

Both Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai believe that the character pattern of parents, quality of their interaction with children, and the disturbing or wholesome home environments, all combine together to exert a lasting influence on the tender psyche of a growing child. Both of them focus upon the abiding nature and far reaching of these tenuous links between parents and children on children on childhood. For Kamala Markandaya, the filial link served as bulwark in one's time of need and affliction. These enduring ties, in her novels, become the broad edifice on which the later relationships depend. For instance, Kamala Markandaya's (**Some Inner Fury**) is the story of Mirabai, a young woman from a partly westernized Hindu family in pre independent India. Previously, confident of her place in the Society and her love for her country, Mira begins to question beliefs when her brother Kit returns from Oxford bringing with him a new life style and his friend Richard. Mira's love for Richard grows as the country's agitation against the British gains intensity. Caught in the crossfire are kit, now a District Magistrate, his wife Premala and Govind Kit's and Mira's adoptive brother, who is rumoured to be the mastermind behind the anti-British violence. Events come to a head when tragedy befalls the family and Mira is forced to choose between her love for Richard and duty towards her country, at the tender age of twelve, Rukmani (**Nectar in a sieve**) understands her parent's inability to marry her to a rich man unlike her sisters. She does not show any resentment towards her parents. Unlike Maya, (**Cry, the Peacock**) who clutches over the past, Rukhmani praises her parents for preparing her to face the challenges of life positively. She appreciates her father's foresight for teaching her the basics of reading and writing. But the course of parent-child relationship is not consistently smooth in all her novels. The financial pressure affects the solidarity of this relationship in (**Nectar in a Sieve**) and in (**A Handful of Rice**). But they are neither bitter nor resentful. In spite of poor economic status, Jayamma and Apu (**A Handful of Rice**) welcome their married daughter s Thangam and Nalini along with their respective husbands and children to stay with them. Being a mother, Jayamma has soft corner for her daughters. She cannot see them suffer because of their useless husbands. Similarly, when Ira takes to prostitution due to scarcity of money, the bonds between Ira and her parents become sour; but they do not grumble at each other. In (**A Silence of Desire**) Sarojini and Dandekar get through hell in their marital relationship but they are sincerely concerned about the emotional needs of their children. Dandekar is really disturbed when he sees his daughter in distress.⁷

The congenial home environment is required for the balance of relationship. But in Anita's world a wholesome satisfying emotional interaction between the parents and children is not found. For instance, in (**Clear Light of Day**) their parents went to parties at Delhi's Roshanara Club, the children of the Das family brought themselves up, reading Byron, listening to the gramophone, and watching over sad, alcoholic Mira Masi. Many years later, the youngest, Tara - now a mother of two-has returned from America to the scene of her unusual, lonesome childhood. Here, as always, is her sister Bim, doggedly single College-Lecturer and Caretaker of all. In the presence, Tara sinks into the blissful torpor of home, at once her dreamy old self, but careful as even around her older sister. For at the heart of this re-union are numerous tensions. Tara feels the persistent guilt of having, like the others, abandoned Bim; their autistic brother Baba is increasingly unlikes; and Bim has not spoken to their other brother, Raja, for years and refuses to go to his daughter's wedding over-pampering of Maya (**Cry, the Peacock**) by her father becomes a stumbling block in her way of maturity which later becomes the root cause of disillusionment in her marital ties. Sita's (**Where Shall We Go This Summer?**) lack of self-control and her melodramatic tantrums are the result of her being neglected by her father and rejected by her mother. The dubious ways of her father fill her with anxiety, fear and distrust that make her wholly incapable of having a balanced emotional interaction with her husband or children. Raka (**Fire on the Mountain**) the great grand daughter of Nanda is a victim of emotional deprivation as her father is a drunkard and mother is in no condition to take care of her emotional needs. Hence, their uncongenial childhood environment provides them only with a simple imprinting of an emotional bond. It does not become a foundation for healthy interpersonal relationships and adjustments.

Regarding the aspect of experience of life, Maya and Sita belong to an aristocracy of sensibility. Earning their daily bread is no problem for them. They are not involved in the real business of living. They have rather plenty of time for procrastination and musings that become their bane-making them brittle. They have got nothing to occupy themselves with. To some extent Nanda Kaul could live to be a great grand-mother even though her marital relationship has been unbearable yoke for her. Her sense of duty and excessively busy life saved her from disintegration. Desai's women have idealized notions of relationships and unusual expectations from those who are related. These expectations lead to disharmony and despair in them. Caught in the dichotomy between reality and idealism, they fail to derive the innocent pleasure of living with the bewildering variety of human beings. Their heightened sensibilities, idealistic notions and tendency to expect more than what they gave make them feel fragmented and unfulfilled.⁸

Majority of Kamala's characters are preoccupied with the issues of physical survival. They have some vocation in their life. Sarojini (*A Silence of Desire*) is busy bringing up her little son and looking after her two daughters. Rukmani and Nalini are busy fighting against annihilating forces of hunger and deprivation. In a way, Kamala Markandaya's novels provide platform of propaganda against the evils of the society. She gives fresh insights into the ambivalence of change in women and men and in human nature. She is convinced that emancipation is closely linked to the eradication of poverty. This is the reason why she deliberately wrote against hunger, want and depravity that inevitably lead to spiritual hunger and apathy.⁹ Through Rukmani and Nalini, the author exposes the harrowing experiences of the poor, and urges the readers to find solutions. They do not have enough to guarantee an ordinary mode of living; otherwise they can trace out all the problems. Largely concerned with the present, they have no time to brood over the past and future. Their practical vision of life makes them realists. Their experiences of life teach them to adapt themselves to the situations that occur in their life. Markandaya opines that a woman needs a vision of herself with power, enough to assets herself in life, to motive her and others around her towards the welfare of the human race. On the contrary, the experiences of Anita's characters, teaches them to achieve harmony and tranquility by alienating themselves and escaping from the demands and expectations inherent in human ties.¹⁰

Position of Women:

The position of the Indian woman in general, and Indian woman as wife in particular, has been paradoxical. In spite of being a prominent figure in the family, she has lived the life of subjugation, suffering and suppression. However, now she has started becoming conscious of her rights and responsibilities, distress and destination. Accordingly she has waged her war, too. Of course, this is not going to be easy and short-lived, as it is against human elements like ego, greed, ambition, selfishness, sadism etc. The present period that she is passing through is a transitional one. And her miles to go before the goal are reached. However, while marching on the selected path, it should also not be forgotten that man-woman relationship can't be restored to the axis of equality and liberty through constitution and legislation alone, but through shared understanding, love, respect a dilution of the egos. Both the writers suggest an honest appraisal of one's own role, strengths and weakness and admiration for the positive qualities of the relationship of spouse, sibling and parent child, can save relationships from disintegration and gives way for serenity of mind and harmonious interaction. The problem is not who would dominate but who would rise to love and understand the other. Love covers, erases and forgives every weakness.¹¹

Therefore the responsibility lies in the hands of Indian women as a spouse, sibling or a parent child who has to balance herself smartly between two important things in her life i.e. between her self-identity and family responsibilities. She has to take care that her urge for self-identity is not eroded while fulfilling her family responsibilities. Thus, Indira Gandhi, perhaps the most successful woman in public life makes a very poignant statement:

Woman must be a bridge and synthesizer. She shouldn't allow herself to be swept off her feet by superficial trends nor

The solution lies neither in fighting for equal position nor denying it, neither in retreat into the women or escape from it.¹²

Indian women can make positive changes to happen in their lives because they have unshakeable faith in their vision and unrelenting confidence in their potential. They have courage and conviction to act on their ideas. They have the potential and unrecognized powers in them which on exploration will explode the every elements of life into success.¹³

II. DISCUSSION :

Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* is the story of Mirabai, a young woman from a partly westernized Hindu Family in Pre-Independent India. Previously confident of her place in society and her love for her country Mira begins to question beliefs when her brother Kit returns from Oxford bringing with him a new life style and his friend Richard.¹⁴ Mira's love for Richard grows as the country's agitation against the British gain intensity. Caught in the crossfire are Kit, now a District Magistrate, his wife Premala and Govind,

Kit's and Mira's adoptive brother, who is rumoured to be the master mind behind the anti-British Violence. Events come to a head when tragedy befalls the family and Mira is forced to choose between her love for Richard and duty towards her country.¹⁵

Kamala Markandaya gives a glowing and graphic account of East-West clash in the back drop of national struggle for freedom, by prophetic three wonderful female figures - Mirabai, Roshan and Premala, who reveal rare and unique, virtues of love and loyalty friendship and understanding. We observe a great difference among the female character of (**Some Inner Fury**).

Mirabai and Richard dream of solemnizing their love in the form of marriage, but they are allured to enjoy the consummation of the romantic love and then comes the disastrous end of it. Richard is mercilessly killed by the Indian revolutionaries giving a shock to Mira.¹⁶

Some Inner Fury is Kamala Markandaya assertion of how a female sacrifices her love, which seems to be her most awaited thing, which was about to happen in her life, yet she decides to choose her duty towards the nation over her love. Here, Markandaya has clearly shown that her heroines are self-confident, assertive, loving, caring and strong enough to take right decisions and are not weaker neither by their sex nor by their mental arbitrary capabilities hence her heroines cannot stand apart, undecided, when a country is divided.¹⁷

While their parents went to parties at Delhi's Roshanara Club, the children of the Das family brought themselves up, reading Byron, listening to the gramophone, and watching over sad, alcoholic Mira Masi. Many years later, the youngest, Tara - now a mother of two-has returned from America to the scene of her unusual, lonesome childhood. Here, as always, is her sister Bim, doggedly single College-Lecturer and Caretaker of all. In the presence, Tara sinks into the blissful torpor of home, at once her dreamy old self, but careful as even around her older sister. For at the heart of this re-union are numerous tensions. Tara feels the persistent guilt of having, like the others, abandoned Bim; their autistic brother Baba is increasingly unique: and Bim has not spoken to their other brother, Raja, for years and refuses to go to his daughter's wedding (**Clear Light of Day**).

Bim is the strongest creature canvassed by Anita Desai artistically, bold and brave character, which fights with her own self and wins over the internal battle successfully. She is not a rebel but is bit difficult to handle yet she compromises at last and look forward in her life with new zeal to survive.¹⁸

Therefore the responsibility lies in the hands of Indian women as a spouse, sibling, child or a parent who has to balance herself smartly between two important things in her life i.e. between her self-identity and family responsibilities. She has to take care that her urge for self-identity is not eroded while fulfilling her family responsibilities.

III. CONCLUSION:

Ultimately, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai, through their fiction, give the message of adjustment and acceptance and not that of a belligerent protest. A woman has to lead normal life in the society assimilating all the aspects of life i.e. love, attraction, hate, trivial quarrels etc. This does not mean they are against woman's need for personal space and individual identity. It is only when some deliberate injustice is done to her or some basic right is willfully violated or snatched from her that she has to rise, stand and fight paying any price. The writers seem to aim at a social structure that is congenial to all humanity irrespective of their gender. With deep imaginative insight, they trace in their novels the lives of contemporary women realistically, retaining at the same time the sense of wonder and mystery that lies at the root of existence.

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